

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

HEARING BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL REFORM

“Investigation into Health Care Disparities in the United States Pacific Island Territories”

**Statement by the Honorable Togiola T. Tulafono, Governor
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INTRODUCTION

Talofa Honorable Chair and members of the Committee on Government Reform, I am honored to be here to testify on the “Health Care Disparities from a US Pacific Island Territory” in this case, American Samoa. The health care and medical issues faced by small islands such as American Samoa, are insurmountable to those faced by states within the contiguous US due to our isolation and remoteness from specialized services unavailable on island, retention and recruitment of medical staff, and overburden and outdated medical facilities. In addition to this, we have a low standard of living compared to the US mainland and other island jurisdictions and low percentage of federal assistance per capita. I would like to share with you some of the issues that are further exacerbated by our location, size and high population growth in the Territory.

ISSUES

Current Health Care Disparities:

It is struggle to meet the rising costs of health care in American Samoa. Our local hospital, the Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) Tropical Medical Center, is 40 years old. It has been upgraded and expanded over the years, but it falls short of meeting the health care needs of our territory. It is one of the best facilities in the South Pacific Region however it falls short in standards compared to health care in Hawaii and the mainland. We have unique problems that will require unique solutions to overcome. Some of these disparities include:

1. A natural environment that is not conducive to good health care, being a tropical climate with increased risk of disease, subject to natural disasters (as in recent flooding, mudslides and Hurricane Heta) and in a hard to reach isolated location.
2. Our health care system is plagued by understaffed agencies and a portion of staff is under-skilled or inadequately trained to perform up to acceptable standards.
3. Trained staff (doctors, nurses, etc.) to maintain adequate care levels is difficult to attach, even at high salary levels, due to our isolated location and limited facilities.

4. The health care system is not adequately meeting the needs of the public, because the healthcare workforce is not sufficiently trained to deliver high quality service.
5. Medical equipment purchases and maintenance costs, and pharmaceutical supplies are high and have risen significantly during the last decade.
6. Funding from local fees and federal resources are continuing not to be sufficient to meet operational needs for a sound health care system, and efforts to bring in a reasonable health insurance program have failed due to low patient volumes and unreasonable offers from insurance providers [\$18 million was our best offer!]
7. An underlying issue is our high (3.7) growth rate, which leads to increasing demands that will outstrip existing and planned improvements to health facilities.
8. Due to limited tertiary care on island, there is an unacceptably large proportion of health care dollars from the Territory's budget absorbed by off-island medical referral cases. A great percentage of total health dollars are spent on tertiary care overseas and too small a sum is spent on preventative health programs and services in American Samoa.

Causes of Disparities

Rapid population growth and changes in migration patterns has lead to an escalation of immigrant families with greater health needs. (Population Report – 2000). Population growth and the increased service demand has resulted with insufficient resources to meet public demands. The ever increasing cost of health care due to inflation and the emergence of new technologies and equipment to support them are pushing the LBJ Tropical Medical Center past the point of being able to support its essential medical services for the community.

A question arises whether improved health services encourages this in-migration, thus helping to cause the stress on facilities and services. Also, we have improved our health and family planning education programs and services, but with our high in-migration pattern, do these programs reach the people causing high birth rates and result is declines? A portion of the users of hospital services have limited funds, and are not able to pay increased fees to support improved health care. Is our responsibility to continue to provide health services even if clients are unable to pay fees? And if we do so, how do we pay the costs? Only limited local revenues exist to expand our health facilities and the Territory is increasingly becoming dependence on limited federal expenditures, such as the DOI, CDBG and CIP Programs. [1996-2000 expenditure \$40.3 million or \$8 million per year. Presently we receive 12 million for health care; 10 million from DOI and 3 million from Medicaid]. Medicare provides at a 1 to 1 ratio to the mainland, even though cost are much higher here. The reality is that our Government collects much less then it expends and we face a serious dilemma on how to finance our needed service providers and an expanded infrastructure to support our health delivery system.

The lack of health and medical insurance in American Samoa further compounds our financial dilemmas in operating services in the Territory. The current financing method is both socially inequitable and unsustainable as the Hospital Authority can no longer support health care to a level that meets public expectations, standards of quality and

scope of services. If health care costs are increased further, and the health system continues to divert a large proportion of health care dollars for off-island tertiary care, the hospital will ultimately have to raise fees to the point that low income individuals will find basic health services inaccessible and essential health services will become eroded due to a lack of funding.

Our remoteness and infrequent air service between American Samoa and Hawaii also adds to the difficulties in medical tertiary care. The passing of our late Governor last year is a case or testament of not having adequate tertiary care on island, limited medical resources and flights that could have abated his untimely demise.

Actions needed to overcome disparities

To meet the causes of these disparities, we have taken a number of actions. However, the reality is that it is difficult to provide quality health care in this environment, to deal with our natural disasters and overcome the attraction of being a United States territory to our neighboring countries. The late Governor Sunia formed a task force to investigate the effects of the rapid population growth we are experiencing. This included impacts and way to overcome these problems, including those to our health delivery system. We have a committee to address population growth issues through implementing the recommendations of the Population Task Force Report.

We need to work with our environment and the climate and natural disasters to which we are subject. I ask you to understand that our challenge is greater than in other locations, and our needs are also greater. Remember that American Samoa represents the United States in this region. It is important that we put our best face forward. We look for assistance in terms of funding, but it is not just monetary. We need help to recruit qualified health professionals. Incentive programs to attract our staffing problems and enable us to attract qualified physicians to come and provide the services so needed in our territory.

We also need to develop and implement a Health and Medical Insurance program in American Samoa to subsidize health care in order to operate, upgrade and deliver top health care to our residents.

Finally, I can not also negate the need to re-evaluate and assess the current facilities after capacity and staffing issues are resolved for much needed upgrades in medical buildings, technological improvements, and develop high tertiary care services to be made available to all residents in American Samoa.

I hope this testimony gives you a perspective of our issues in American Samoa. It is my hope that you can assist us in the areas I have outlined that continue to plague us in providing health care services to all who reside in the Territory.

Thank you for your attention and I appreciate this opportunity to be here with your committee to share a perspective from a US Territory in the South Pacific. Soifua ma ia Manuia!